Tribute to a Committed Intellectual

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Let the People Speak: Tanzania Down the Road to Neo-Liberalism
by Issa G. Shivji
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Let the People Speak was Issa Gulamhussein Shivji's last book before his retirement from the University of Dar es Salaam in 2006. Retiring at the age of 60, he had by then served the University's Faculty of Law for 36 uninterrupted years. He distinguished himself as a thorough intellectual whose work reflected a commitment to Africa that is unmatched in its passion, rigour and vigour. Shivji combined erudition and relevance which he presented in accessible modes that also included poetry and short story, oftentimes rendered in Kiswahili. He earned his LL.B. (Hons.) in 1970 from the then University of East Africa, his LL.M. in 1971 from the University of London and his Ph.D. in 1982 from the University of Dar es Salaam. Throughout these years, and considering the multiple crises that befell many African universities, Shivji stayed put at Dar es Salaam, rising through the ranks from tutorial fellow on 1 May 1970 to full professor on 1 July 1986.

Shivji's stay at the 'Hill' did not compromise his academic productivity, his active and wide engagement with Africa and the world and the quality of his work, most of which are published within the continent. In fact, the stay cemented his connection to and involvement in local social struggles and emancipatory movements and enabled him to remain a steadfast defender of local communities on a wide rang of issues, such as wage levels for the working class, human rights, democracy, constitutionalism, land rights, and women empowerment. Apart from the villages, the courts and related arena, his convictions on freedom and struggles for democracy are documented in his published works. He authored and edited more than ten books, six monographs, numerous book chapters and journal articles. He also served as chairman of the Presidential Committee of Inquiry into Land Matters and as member of CODESRIA's Executive Committee.

The essays in the book under review, originally published in three different Tanzania-based newspapers, reflect Shivji's knowledge on a wide range of topics. The book targets a broad audience which Shivji simultaneously learned from and educated. It illustrates how such engagement can be conducted without compromising quality and relevance and without turning into a patronising monologue from a book professor. Considering the declining utility and relevance of public intellectualism in the world, especially in the global North, where this activity mirrors simple randomness and chaos,[1] Shivji's essays retain a ray of hope that intellectuals can still express the popular will of the general citizenry and be conscious instruments in articulating the social and economic struggles of the people. The book's title, taken from an essay Shivji penned on 25 April 1998 (see p. 285), conveys this. It emphasizes the dangers posed by the neo-liberal context that has sanctioned the onslaught on peoples' voices through its worship of the uncontrolled market. There are ten thematic clusters in the book, bracketed by poems and with an introductory chapter. The clusters include a reflection on the multi-party system; constitutionalism and constitution-making; the question of the union of Tanganyika and Zanzibar; party politics and politicians; intellectuals in politics; neo-liberalism in Tanzania; race, religion and ethnicity; state violence and impunity; freedom; and pan-Africanism.

A review of Shivji's previous publications confirms the longstanding and deep reflection on almost all these themes. Thus, judgement on the contribution of this volume rests not on whether it meets the so-called academic standards (an undertaking one need not ask of Shivji anyway), but on whether it is sufficiently educative to the wider, perhaps, non-specialist audience and whether it expresses the concerns, desires, and demands of a public that is so often politically asphyxiated and academically ignored, misrepresented or misinterpreted. Further, it should be useful to determine the extent to which this volume enables us to read Africa's concerns through the experiences of Tanzania. This review has these concerns in mind but is implicitly also a tribute to an academic life executed with honesty, commitment and credit.

All the essays in this collection engage issues of public interest. They also expand the terms of such an engagement beyond those set by the state, politicians or intellectuals eager to operate within a neo-liberal framework while serving political dogma. There is no doubt therefore on whether the book is educative. Parts I (on multi-party politics) and VI (on the road to neo-liberalism) ably flag the goals of this book. In Part I, Shivji critically engages the Report of the Presidential Commission on Party System chaired by Chief Justice Francis Nyalali (Nyalali Report) while in Part VI he examines the implications of Tanzania's road to neo-liberalism for, among others, industry, labour, urban housing, and land; the force of South Africa's second primitive accumulation of wealth in Africa; education, which has not only undermined relevance and quality by orienting schooling towards a 'mimicking rather than thinking' culture (pp. 161, 192) but also turned intellectuals into party ideologues and 'globalisers' errand boys' (p. 178); and trade and agriculture, where the land tenure system has been distorted and community systems of resolving land disputes have been undermined - all in the name of subjecting land exchange to market logic.

In both parts of the book, neo-liberalism is dissected. Viewed as an ideology that mutilated our perceptions of democracy by reducing it to a choiceless multi-party version, the sections illustrate that the ideology has prioritised market relations as primary to our discussion of the overall processes of globalization, even though this process predates the neo-liberal moment. By critically engaging neo-liberalism from a political economy perspective, Shivji shows convincingly that the invidious project of subjecting every realm of society to unmitigated liberalisation, privatisation and marketisation has no democratic possibility of empowering the people but rather accentuates neo-imperialism and dismantles the pro-poor protective legal regime in labour and housing, for instance. Further, in its unquenchable desire to create an investor-friendly environment, the state has been reduced to the role of a 'night watchman', as Mkandawire put it, abdicating its role of making policy, and managing politics and the economy. 'A state which is not independent in making policy decisions,' Shivji argues, 'cannot be held accountable by its people nor can [it] let its people participate in policy-making' (p. 177). Clearly, these two sections of the book go beyond the terms of debate set by the originators of such imperialist ideologies and shows that neo-liberalism has reduced the struggle for democracy into a project conducted by 'state patronage or elite proxy' (p. 27).

The deceit around the rhetoric that multi-party politics equals democracy is discussed and exposed in Parts I, II, V and VI. This is a debate that exercised the attention of African scholarship of the last two decades and Shivji was an active participant.[2] This debate has important continent-wide ramifications. However, in many countries on the continent, the celebrated arrival of multi-party politics occluded the deeper questioning of the neo-liberal framing of the prospects of that so-called democratic transition; the results have become too obvious in countries like Kenya, Cameroon, Nigeria, etc., where elections have become periodic rituals of creating illegitimate leaders. Much of that celebration focused on important, but superficial, changes like increasing the number of political parties, deepening of civil society, installing esoteric freedoms and rights without delving deeper into questions of constitutionalism, constitution-making and national consensus arrived at through tested means like the national conference and the validation of the legitimacy of constitutions through referendum. By analysing these options hinted at but hardly thoroughly investigated by the Nyalali report, Shivji shows the shallowness of the discussions of multi-party transition and its inability to grasp the centrality of popular power in validating democracy. Particularly relevant are sections that deal with the Nyalali report which argue for crystallising the national consensus on public issues; with intellectuals in politics that illustrate how these elites have abrogated their roles and obligations; with constitutionalism that emphasizes that 'the prerequisite of a constitutional government is that the constitution and the laws themselves are just, fair and equitable and therefore legitimate' (p. 53).

Part III focuses on the union between Tanganyika and Zanzibar crafted in 1964. Shivji argues that the Achilles heel of Tanzania's constitution has always been the Union question. Issues of constitutional democracy are at the heart of the historic altercations among people in the Mainland and between them and Zanzibaris regarding the Union. Born out of the Cold War fears of the East African heads of states and America, the Union was cobbled together by Nyerere and Karume to deflate the heroic uprising that defeated the sultanate under British tutelage at independence in 1964, but soon after, the new head of state of Zanzibar, Abeid Karume, ignored all pretences to constitutional democratic rule. Much of the post-Karume era in Zanzibar, Shivji argues, has been characterised by denials within Chama Cha Mapinduzi party (CCM) on the needs, nay demands of Zanzibaris for a new democratic era in which their voices on the Union issues are heard and implemented. The era has further witnessed denials with respect to a people-driven discussion of the Union issue in the Mainland, with CCM seeking to 'keep total and exclusive control over' the debate, how it proceeds and the final outcome (p. 105). The Zanzibar question has therefore gelled into broader concerns for a new constitutional dispensation with various demands in the Mainland for three or two Union governments. Shivji discusses this in several essays in Parts III and VII of the book. He proposes that, in the context of multi-partism, the way out is to entrench the Union issue in a new constitutional order, whose legitimacy can only be established if the enactment is preceded by an acceptable public debate and the holding of a people-driven referendum. The point, he concludes, 'is that political unity between Zanzibar and Tanganyika is feasible and desirable provided it is built on democratic foundations and therefore beneficial to the people' (p.120).

Parts IV and VII of the study examine party politics in the era of *mageuzi* (change) in Tanzania, reflecting more particularly on the question of political choice and the tycoonisation of CCM in its relation to the racialisation of political discourse. Shivji frames this discussion in the context of the difference between social visions and visionaries, arguing that the ability of people to craft long term guides for society must be distinguished from the role of visionaries who, like missionaries, are wedded to a mission which they must achieve. Shivji foregrounds the desire to 'evolve our own mode of politics' and using the lessons of the Fourth Congress of CCM held at Chimwaga asks what should be the basis of choice between party programmes and personalities in the era of *mageuzi*. The notion of mode of politics is usefully mentioned to underscore the need for a party system that offers choice based on the assumption that the electorate is 'fully informed and enlightened so as to make a rational choice' (p. 133). The assumption, too, is that competing parties articulate contrasting visions to give the electorate a real choice. In Shivji's understanding, none of the parties in Tanzania offer such alternatives. Instead, much of the rhetoric about choice is empty as none of the parties propose a vision of liberation and emancipation that aims to lift people from their downtrodden and oppressive reality.

On the contrary, the reality of this kind of pluralist politics is that people are forced to choose on the basis of personalities rather than party policies and programmes. In the years after the death of Mwalimu, Shivji points to the liberalised appetites of Tanzanian politicians whose greed had previously been tamed by Mwalimu but whose newfound liberty is safeguarded by the neo-liberalism of the current era. Reflecting on the consequences of this new era, Shivji shows that not only did CCM find itself in the grip of tycoons willing to bankroll the party, but also that such liberalisation had unleashed a dangerous opposition racial discourse in which the racial and ethnic extraction of party sponsors became cause for scoring populist points. The study warns of the dangers of such a campaign approach and proceeds to illustrate, using the case of Zanzibar (see pp. 228-231), why the racial and religious discourses represent diversionary smokescreens employed by irresponsible elite to blame religion for problems that are essentially political. But even more important is the extended reflection on the role of personalities in politics where Shivji correctly argues that the kind of politics that focuses on personalities has no emancipatory agenda as the example of Chiluba and Mwanawasa in Zambia, Muluzi and Mutharika in Malawi, Eyadema and Kabila in Togo and DRC, respectively, illustrate. In particular, the reality that politics in the era of transition in Africa is power- rather than people-driven is clearly explained in Part IV (pp. 148-152).

There are many more themes covered in this study than can be ably summarised in this review. The one area, however, where the usefulness of this study can be measured is how well it brings together three themes of paramount concern not just to Tanzania but also to Africa. These themes are citizenship, pan-Africanity and the required social vision that bridges them. Tanzania occupies a special place on the issue of vision. As Shivji shows in Part VII, Ujamaa was a radical nationalist ideology that cemented people together regardless of ethnicity or race. Thus, underlying Tanzania's notion of citizenship was a social vision that inspired unity and equality across diversities. Shivji is aware that Tanzania may not have achieved equality among people, but there was a vision that gave people the hope for the eventual attainment of equality. The dismantling of Ujamaa with the onset of neo-liberal 'marketisation' of politics opened the way for politicisation of these identities. The negative results are there for all to see.

Shivji extends this analysis to the question of pan-Africanism which he contrasts with the dangerous forces of imperialism. Pan-Africanism was driven by two main currents: nationalism and continental/ Diasporic unity. African nationalism was indeed a repudiation of European imperialism. It was founded on and driven by a desire to re-humanise African people. If the attainment of independence meant national sovereignty for and humanity of the people, the debt trap in Africa has represented a threat to this sovereignty and humanity. Though the essays in Part X focus on the debilitating debt crisis, showing how Tanzania often substitutes the provision of basic human needs for debt repayment (pp. 277-286), they constitute a basis for a good discussion on a key principle of pan-Africanist ideology, that is, national sovereignty. The implications of this discussion for Africa are many; and these essays have greater resonance with the wider African debt predicament than the author was able to capture.

In conclusion, it is important to return to the theme of social vision, hope and self-reliance which run through this book and illuminate Shivji's convictions. Citing Mwalimu Nyerere, Shivji illustrates the significance of social vision in assuring people of a hopeful future. That hopeful future, based on the self-reliance of a sovereign nation-state, was the cornerstone of Tanzania's history after the Arusha Declaration. Neo-liberalism has deflated that hope and allowed an otherwise dormant volcano to erupt into social upheavals - an eruption that is, above all, driven by inequality and poverty. 'Peace,' Nyerere argued, 'is born of hope, when hope is gone there will be social upheaval' (p.224). In a nutshell, the single most important lesson that one takes away from this enthralling collection for Africa is the urgent need to re-enact a new social vision for the African people that is based on the idea of self-reliance but anchored in a pan-African ideology. These two have been central to Shivji's scholarship and to his commitment to the people of Africa. Shivji can still walk proudly knowing that his service at the 'Hill' was not in vain and that his voice still reverberates across the African terrain.

Notes

1. See Richard A. Posner's reflection on the US situation in *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003.
2. One of his seminal publications in this debate is Shivji, "The Democracy Debate in Africa: Tanzania," in *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol. 50, 1991, pp. 79-99.